DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 457 106 SO 032 989

AUTHOR	Hess, Diana
TITLE	Teaching Students To Discuss Controversial Public Issues. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-SO-2001-7
PUB DATE	2001-09-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0016
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Tel: 800-266-3815 (Toll Free); Fax: 812-855-0455; e-mail: ericso@indiana.edu. For full text: http://ericso.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Citizenship Education; *Civics; *Controversial Issues (Course Content); Curriculum Development; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Talking with others, especially people with different viewpoints, about matters of public and common concern is a basic pro-democracy skill and act. For that reason, teaching young people how to participate more effectively in discussions of controversial public issues (CPI) has long been a major goal of social studies educators. In most social studies classes, however, there are few CPI discussions. Those teachers who include CPI discussions in their curricula recognize that it is difficult both to teach and to learn these skills. Drawing on recent research, this digest examines the meaning of CPI discussions and recommends how teachers can structure their curricula and teaching methods to improve their students' ability to discuss controversial issues. (BB)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

ERIC Digest

http://ericso.indiana.edu

2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120 Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana 47408 812-855-3838 · 800-266-3815

EDO-SO-2001-7

September 2001

Teaching Students to Discuss Controversial Public Issues

By Diana Hess

ED 457 106

SO 032 989

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC Educational Resources Information Center

Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education

DIGEST

http://ericso.indiana.edu

2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120 Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana 47408 812-855-3838 • 800-266-3815

EDO-SO-2001-7

September 2001

Teaching Students to Discuss Controversial Public Issues

By Diana Hess

Talking with others, especially people with different viewpoints, about matters of public and common concern is a basic pro-democracy skill and act. For that reason, teaching young people how to participate more effectively in discussions of controversial public issues (CPI) has long been a major goal of social studies educators. In most social studies classes, however, there are few CPI discussions. Those teachers who include CPI discussions in their curricula recognize that it is difficult both to teach and to learn these skills. Drawing on recent research, this Digest examines the meaning of CPI discussions and recommends how teachers can structure their curricula and teaching methods to improve their students' ability to discuss controversial issues.

What is a CPI Discussion? A CPI is an unresolved question of public policy that sparks significant disagreement. Recent examples in the United States pertain to national, state, and local levels of government: Should federal funding be used for embryonic stem cell research? Should a state government mandate that students pass a graduation test to earn a high school diploma? Should public funds of a local government be used to build a new sports stadium? Should a curfew for youth be enacted by a city council? An international CPI could involve negotiations about a new environmental treaty or whether nations with poor human rights records should be allowed to host the Olympics.

There are three attributes of a CPI: 1) the controversy is "live," meaning it is currently on the public platter; 2) some "public" either informs or makes a decision about the issue; and 3) there is significant disagreement about the best solution. For an example of a non-CPI, consider this question: should women have the right to vote in the United States? This issue is not a CPI because it is not a live controversy in the United States (although it certainly is one in some parts of the world).

Although there are numerous ways to include controversial public issues in the school curriculum such as simulations or role plays, the discussion of them has long been advocated by social studies educators (Hahn 1991, 1998; Parker 1996). "Discussion is a form of group inquiry – a consciously-shared form, a listening-and-talking form. It requires a group of people, an aim, a text (broadly defined to include an issue), and a focusing question that is tied to one of the three aims." The three aims are to "reach a decision about what a 'we' should do to achieve an end; to reach an enlarged understanding of a text; or to reach agreement on ends" (Parker & Hess 2001, 281). While most CPI discussions are focused on the deliberative aim (i.e., "what should we do?"), it is important to focus CPI discussions on building a deeper understanding of the issue or considering the ends that a "public" wants to achieve.

At any given time, a plethora of controversial public issues could be included in the curriculum. Consequently, it is important for teachers to establish clear criteria for selecting issues. Successful criteria include 1) the extent to which the issue involves a clear conflict between competing values (such as equality and liberty); 2) the availability of high quality instructional resources pertaining to the issue; 3) the connection between a specific issue and some larger curricular goal; and 4) the likelihood that students will be interested in the issue and will want to discuss it.

How to Improve CPI Discussions. Two recent studies of middle and high school social studies teachers show that it is important to teach both for and with discussion (Hess and Posselt 2001; Hess 1998). Teaching for discussion means helping students improve their discussion abilities. The outcome of this type of instruction is students who become highly skilled discussants. Teaching with discussion extends to such considerations as the need to develop understanding of a specific issue, to enhance critical thinking skills, and to improve interpersonal skills (Larson 1997). Teachers who consider these needs for using CPI discussions are more likely to devote sufficient time to them and to teach explicitly the skills students need to become better discussants.

Teachers who are skilled at teaching their students to become better CPI discussants do not assume that students come into their classes with those skills already developed. Successful teachers begin by helping an entire class conceptualize what a good CPI discussion sounds and looks like by showing examples in video programs (Miller & Singleton 1997). Then students are asked to co-construct the rules and norms that they will follow when participating in CPI discussions. Specific skills are taught explicitly through modeling and practice, such as 1) how to ask probing questions without insulting someone; 2) how to make a transition to another point, and 3) how to invite the participation of students who have yet to participate. Throughout this process, skilled teachers ask students to assess the quality of their discussions and determine what they are doing well and what still needs work.

Most CPI discussions, especially those with a large group, require the teacher to be a facilitator, someone who knows the issue well and has the teaching skills to spark spirited, widespread, and high-quality participation. A facilitator who stays too quiet is missing an opportunity to help students have a better discussion. Additionally, facilitators should work to ensure that the content of their questions is aligned to the goals of the discussion. For example, one standard for an effective CPI discussion is to strive for a "best case, fair hearing of competing points of view" (Kelly 1996, 10). Facilitator questions, then, should focus on raising different perspectives and ensuring that the discussants stick with them long enough to generate a fair hearing.

Diana Hess is an Assistant Professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Another discussion goal is equality of participation. This does not mean that every discussant will say exactly as much as every other discussant, but that many people will participate and no single person or small group will dominate. A question that would achieve that goal is: "Does anyone else who has not yet had a chance to participate have anything to say about this point?" In summary, facilitators should hold their own participation in check. But they should facilitate strongly enough to work toward both high quality and equality of participation in the discussion.

What Do Students Think About Discussion? Recent research involving high school social studies students shows that, for the vast majority, discussion is a valued form of learning. For example, a clear majority of the students said they enjoyed class discussions and that participating in discussion helps them learn more. There is, however, an interesting contradiction between the value students place on discussions and whether they think they have a responsibility to participate in them. A strong majority of students said that they have a responsibility to contribute to class discussions, that verbal expression is an essential skill, and that students should be taught how to participate effectively in discussions. They are, however, divided over whether participation in class discussion is a matter of personal choice and on whether or not it is fair for a teacher to base a part of a student's grade on the quality of her or his participation. The most important factors that influence students' verbal participation in discussion are knowledge about a discussion topic, interest in the topic, and time to think before speaking.

Clearly, peers significantly influence whether or not students participate in class discussions. For example, receiving criticism from classmates during a discussion and fearing that classmates will think an idea is unworthy are more likely to cause students to speak less in a discussion than fear that the teacher will criticize or judge students' contributions. What teachers do and say, however, is still critical to students' discussion participation. By projecting that she or he cares about students as people, asking questions about what students say in a discussion, and basing a part of students' grades on discussion participation, a teacher can stimulate most students to speak more in discussion (Hess & Posselt 2001; Schwingle 2000).

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNAL IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

Hahn, Carole L. "Controversial Issues in Social Studies." In HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING AND LEARNING, ed. June P. Shaver, 470-482. New York: Macmillan, 1991.

Hahn, Carole L. BECOMING POLITICAL: COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998. ED 426 920.

Hess, Diana. DISCUSSING CONTROVERSIAL PUBLIC ISSUES IN SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOMS: LEARNING FROM SKILLED TEACHERS. Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1998.

Hess, Diana, and J. Posselt. HOW STUDENTS EXPERIENCE AND LEARN FROM DISCUSSING PUBLIC ISSUES IN SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001.

Kelly, Thomas E. "Discussing Controversial Issues: Four Perspectives on the Teacher's Role." THEORY AND RESEARCH IN SOCIAL EDUCATION 14 (Spring 1986): 113-138. EJ 335 209.

Larson, Bruce. TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF DISCUSSION AS METHOD AND OUTCOME. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997. ED 407 692.

Miller, Barbara, and Laurel Singleton. PREPARING CITIZENS: LINKING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT AND INSTRUCTION IN CIVIC/LAW-RELATED EDUCATION. Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1997. ED 410 158.

Parker, Walter C. "Curriculum for Democracy." In DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, AND THE SCHOOLS, ed. Roger Soder, 182-210. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996. ED 390 156.

Parker, Walter C., and Diana Hess. "Teaching With and For Discussion." TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION 17 (April 2001): 273-289.

Schwingle, M. A. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ABOUT THE USE OF GRADED DISCUSSIONS IN SOCIAL STUDIES. Master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 2000.

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U. S. Department of Education under contract number ED-99-CO-0016. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U. S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U. S. Government. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.